

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, TH

SUBJECT: SPECULATION ON NEW ELECTIONS

SUMMARY. SOME THAI REMAIN UNCONVINCED THAT KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT CAN LAST LONG AND PREDICT NEW ELECTIONS SOON. GEN. KRIT SUGGESTED BY SOME OBSERVERS AS STRONG CANDIDATE TO REPLACE KHUKRIT. SUCH SPECULATION SEEMS PREMATURE. END SUMMARY

1. KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN IN OFFICE OVER NINE MONTHS, BUT MANY THAI ARE STILL UNCONVINCED THAT THE COALITION CAN LAST MUCH LONGER. THE PRESENCE IN THE COALITION OF NUMEROUS DISPARATE AND OFTEN RIVAL PARTIES IS OFTEN SEEN AS MAKING IT EXTREMELY DIFFICULT FOR KHUKRIT TO PERFORM IN A CONSISTENTLY DECISIVE MANNER. EVEN THOUGH HE HAS SUCCESSFULLY FACED A CONTINUOUS SERIES OF LARGE AND SMALL CRISES, THERE ARE NUMEROUS FIGURES, BOTH WITHIN THE COALITION AND IN THE OPPOSITION, WHO FEEL THE NEED FOR STRONGER LEADERSHIP THAN KHUKRIT HAS BEEN ABLE TO PROVIDE.

2. IN A RECENT CONVERSATION WITH AN EMBASSY OFFICER, MP PHICHAI RATTAKUN, DEPUTY LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION DEMOCRAT PARTY (THE LARGEST IN PARLIAMENT), ECHOED THESE ATTITUDES. PHICHAI, WHO WAS BRIEFLY FOREIGN MINISTER IN THE SENI PRAMOT GOVERNMENT, SAID HE FELT THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT WAS WEAK AND GETTING WEAKER, AND ESTIMATED THAT IT WOULD COLLAPSE WITHIN TWO OR THREE MONTHS. HE PREDICTED GENERAL ELECTIONS BEFORE MARCH, 1976. NOT

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SURPRISINGLY, PHICHAI SAID THE DEMOCRATS WOULD DO MUCH

BETTER IN THE NEXT ELECTION. PHICHAJ ALSO SAID THAT WITH SO MANY DIFFICULT PROBLEMS FACING IT, THAILAND REQUIRES A STRONG LEADER. HE SUGGESTED THAT FORMER THAI ARMY COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, GEN. KRIT SIWARA, WOULD MAKE AN IDEAL PRIME MINISTER. THESE SENTIMENTS ARE ECHOED BY OTHER THAI, IN BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE.

3. PHICHAJ'S PREDICTION THAT THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT WILL LAST ONLY TWO TO THREE MONTHS LONGER IS THE SHORTEST TIME SPAN WE HAVE HEARD HERE. A NEW FORCE PARTY (OPPOSITION) MEMBER IN CHIANG MAI RECENTLY TOLD AN EMBASSY OFFICER THAT HIS PARTY EXPECTED ELECTIONS ABOUT THE END OF 1976, BY WHICH TIME IT HOPED TO BE ABLE TO FIELD A CANDIDATE IN EVERY DISTRICT. COL. SOMKHIT SISANGKHOM, LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION SOCIALIST PARTY, TOLD THE POLITICAL COUNSELOR ON DECEMBER 15 THAT HE EXPECTED THE CURRENT PARLIAMENT TO LAST ITS FULL FOUR YEAR TERM AND KHUKRIT TO REMAIN IN OFFICE DURING THIS PERIOD.

4. NEW ELECTIONS WILL BE EXPENSIVE, NOT ONLY FOR THE GOVERNMENT, BUT FOR THE POLITICAL PARTIES AS WELL, AND FEW PARTIES ARE IN A POSITION TO FINANCE NEW ELECTIONS FOR SOME TIME. MANY PARTIES WILL NEED MORE TIME TO STRENGTHEN AND EXPAND THEIR PARTY PROVINCIAL APPARATUS BEFORE THEY ARE READY FOR ELECTIONS. MANY OF THE SMALLER PARTIES FEAR THAT THEY WILL NOT SURVIVE THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTIONS AT ALL. BARRING A MAJOR CRISIS WHICH KHUKRIT HANDLES BADLY (ALWAYS A POSSIBILITY) OR SOMETHING EQUALLY UNPREDICTABLE, IN ALL LIKELIHOOD THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT WILL BY ABLE TO SURVIVE A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE FOR SOME TIME TO COME. INCREASED EXTERNAL PRESSURE FROM HOSTILE NEIGHBORS, POLITICAL UNREST ASSOCIATED WITH ECONOMIC PROBLEMS (RECENT PRICE RISES, THE CURRENT RICE PRICING PROBLEM) MIGHT CREATE SERIOUS CRISES INVOLVING THE EXISTENCE OF THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT. KHUKRIT HIMSELF MIGHT AT SOME POINT WISH TO HAVE ELECTIONS, WHILE HIS OWN SOCIAL ACTION PARTY IS STILL IN THE ASCENDANCY AND HE IS IN CONTROL OF THE GOVERNMENT. MOST OBSERVERS FEEL THAT KHUKRIT MIGHT BE THE PRIMARY BENEFICIARY IF ELECTIONS WERE HELD NOW.

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5. PHICHAJ POINTED OUT IN HIS CONVERSATION THAT THE ASSUMPTION OF A CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP ROLE BY KRIT SIWARA WILL COME THROUGH ELECTION TO PARLIAMENT FIRST. ANY SPECULATION ABOUT THIS OF NECESSITY ASSUMES EARLY ELECTIONS. PHICHAJ EVIDENTLY FEELS THAT THE DEMOCRAT PARTY OUGHT TO WOO KRIT AND MAKE HIM PRIME MINISTER. HIS VIEW IS UNDOUBTEDLY SHARED BY OTHER CONSERVATIVES IN THE DEMOCRAT PARTY. THE LIBERAL MINORITY IN THE PARTY MIGHT NOT BE

HAPPY WITH THIS, HOWEVER, BUT PHICHAI SAID HE DOES NOT ANTICIPATE A SERIOUS PARTY RIFT. KRIT HIMSELF SEEMS TO BE KEEPING HIS OPTIONS OPEN. HE IS MAINTAINING CONTACT WITH BUSINESS LEADERS AND VARIOUS POLITICAL PARTIES (HE BACKED MANY FINANCIALLY DURING THE LAST ELECTIONS AND HAS YET TO CALL IN THE DEBT OWED). MANY OBSERVERS FEEL THAT KRIT WILL FORM HIS OWN PARTY FOR THE NEXT ELECTION, BUT IF HE WAS ASSURED OF THE CONTROLLING ROLE IN AN EXISTING PARTY, HE MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO JOIN IT.

6. SHOULD KRIT BE ELECTED TO PARLIAMENT HE WOULD BE A PRIME CANDIDATE TO HEAD A COALITION OF CONSERVATIVES AND MODERATE PARTIES. HE WOULD CERTAINLY BE ACCEPTABLE TO MOST OF THAILAND'S WEALTHY ELITE, THE BUREAUCRACY AND THE ARMED FORCES. BUT SPECULATION AT THIS POINT ABOUT KRIT AS PRIME MINISTER HAS LITTLE MEANING, AS KRIT IS JUST ONE POSSIBILITY AMONG SEVERAL, AND, UNTIL HE IS ELECTED TO PARLIAMENT, SPECULATION ABOUT HIS BECOMING PRIME MINISTER IS PREMATURE.

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